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# ***Hope -A- Dope; Finding meaning in a world bereft of it is the first step toward combating hopelessness - not pretending to be hopeful John Semley***

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## **Body**

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"It me." On September 24, 2018, 10:17 a.m., that's how a totally unprepared world was introduced to Gritty, the new mascot for the Philadelphia Flyers hockey club.

Bulbous, bedraggled, with his third-degree-burn-victim face grinning through a shaggy veil of tangerine hair, his irises unmoored and rolling around wildly, Gritty looked like a Muppet marinated in brown acid, or a distant relative of McDonaldland's Grimace who shows up to a family reunion uninvited, drinks all the beers, bums two decks worth of smokes and rips home on a commandeered riding mower.

Upon unveiling, Gritty's follower count on Twitter skyrocketed (it stands at 159,000 at the time of writing), he appeared on The Tonight Show and was pretty much instantly canonized among the rookery of weirdos on the cult call-in podcast The Best Show. More curiously: the socialist magazine Jacobin immediately claimed the mascot, tweeting "Gritty is a worker." On a recent visit to the City of Brotherly Love, U.S. President Donald Trump was greeted with black-clad dissidents whose signs and placards were adorned with Gritties. "Gritty Hates Trump!" the protestors chanted, essentially situating an NHL mascot as an unlikely antifascist icon. In response, The Wall Street Journal's Jillian Kay Melchior penned an anxious op-ed, commanding, "Keep your Marxist hands off Gritty."

Gritty, in the parlance of our time, broke the internet. Gritty, in the parlance of that same internet, is everything. And Gritty, in a surreal turn befitting Gritty himself, instantly became a token of quasi-ironic. The mercurial flow of memes and online iconography is notoriously slippery. So it's nearly impossible to predict where Gritty will be situated on the political spectrum by the time this essay is published - or, indeed, by the time I'm finished typing this sentence. But in a way, Gritty is almost incidental to the Gritty phenomenon, and to the character's instant adoption of extremely online, left-progressive Millennials. That the character is simultaneously absurd, scary, innocent and animated by a twitchy anarchic energy certainly doesn't hurt anything. But more importantly, Gritty arrived, fully-formed, as a blank slate.

Gritty was an opportunity for meaning in a world increasingly bereft of it. And such occasions - however stupid or seemingly arbitrary - may be a solid first step towards rethinking a world that seems increasingly imperilled.

APOCALYPSE, LIKE... RIGHT NOW

Twelve years.

That's how long we have to limit a full-blown climate-change catastrophe, according to a report prepared by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), released on Monday, October 8, 2018.

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This report came three days after Ontario Premier Doug Ford and Alberta United Conservative Party leader Jason Kenney teamed up to tell a Calgary audience that federal carbon taxes are "the worst" and "unfair," and 464 days after President Trump announced that the U.S. - global runner-up in CO2 emissions, after China - would be pulling out of the Paris Agreement, which was designed to limit the deleterious effects of *climate* change and adapt to the consequences of a world in which global temperatures have risen to 2 °C above pre-industrial levels. Reporting on a 2018 study on how eating crap food contributes to some 20 per cent of global deaths, The Guardian summed it up thusly: "Our behaviour is our biggest threat to staying alive." We're devouring our planet as if it's a greasy Wendy's Bacon Deluxe.

Twelve years. That means if you happen to have a child who was born on October 3, 2018, then by the time they are 12 years old, they will be living in a world that is a) considerably hotter; and b) likely to be unrecognizable, geopolitically. "The earth has had five major extinctions," intones Swedish actress Alicia Vikander, who narrates the recent Canadian documentary Anthropocene. "We are now in the middle of the sixth great extinction. This time because of human impact."

Translated, "anthropocene" means "the age of humans." Like so many terms devised by humans to describe their own material effects on the planet and its history - the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, La Belle Époque, the Great Leap Forward - it may seem wholly arrogant. Like, we're so special that we deserve our own designation of geologic time. As Anthropocene directors Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier describe it in a recent issue of The Walrus: "The conceptual idea behind the anthropocene epoch is that humans now change the Earth and its systems more than all natural processes combined."

While one's chest may swell triumphantly at the prospect of having conquered geology itself, this human effect is not, generally speaking, a good thing. As Pope Francis put it in *Laudato Si*, his 2015 papal encyclical on the fate of the environment, "The Earth, our home, is beginning to look more and more like an immense pile of filth." Every generation may have its doomsday cultists - from the Fifth Monarchists of the English Civil War, through to the Branch Davidians, Y2K-proofers, and Mayan calendar-observers.

The difference now is that an actual environmental apocalypse seems both imminent, and entirely our fault. And the fear of impending cataclysm is, as is often the case, the result of a failure to hew meaning out of everyday life. "Apocalypse," declared the British literary critic Frank Kermode, "is a part of the modern Absurd."

## HOW TO DIE

The essential condition of our age is one of meaninglessness. And not just meaninglessness, but an earned, utterly validated meaninglessness. It is the age of the meme, in which a seemingly benign image - a smirking cartoon frog, a googly-eyed NHL mascot, an a-OK hand gesture - can be released from what little meaning it had and be repurposed. Signs and signifiers float like the frosted multi-grain graphemes of Alpha-Bits cereal buoyed in a bowl of warm milk.

In a sharp analysis for *Salon*, Deidre Olsen describes Millennial hipster nihilism (in the form of suicide jokes, memes about dancing hot dogs and the consumption of detergent pods) as a form of Dadaist absurdism. "Like earlier forms of Dadaism," Olsen writes, "internet memes deconstruct and scramble all coherent thought into incoherent brain goop, left open for you to take what you want from them as you will."

To die has always been the universal lot of humankind. But now, mortality sheds the trappings and suits of existential woe and reveals its flinty, absurd, totally material horror, like the stark naked skeleton of a cartoon Grim Reaper loosed from its obscuring robes. Erstwhile traditions of philosophy, religious scholasticism and generalized wisdom have grappled exhaustively with how to live well: "Happiness is the meaning and purpose of life," said Aristotle; "Finish each day and be done with it," said Emerson; "We have what we seek," said the Catholic mystic Thomas Merton; Gandhi preached of the "indomitable will;" and Viktor Frankl of "right action" and "right conduct."

These and other insightful, brainy quotes have been embossed on coffee mugs and fridge magnets to provide passing solace as one shuffles from the bedroom community to their job in a gas-gobbling automobile, or dines on

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factory-farmed beef or indulges in the ancient act of reproduction or otherwise expands one's carbon footprint. Yet they are answers to a question Anthropocene begins and ends with an almost impossibly stunning image of poached elephant tusks being arranged like ornate ivory wigwams and set ablaze - thus immolating the ivory's potential to re-enter the global market and be recast as billiard balls, piano keys or ornately carved and unfathomably expensive artworks.

There is something beautifully zerosum in that image of materially valuable ivory lit up like the Fourth of July. Instead of being sold and put to some superficially valuable use (say, using the avails to lobby for anti-poaching legislation), it is simply destroyed, its exchange value snuffed out, the market deprived of the resource. Destruction becomes, a little perversely, an inspiring act.

It is an image of radiant, defiant hopelessness.

## A NEW HOPELESSNESS

A big problem of our millennium is that we waste too much time wrapped up in the messaging of hope. Barack Obama ran on it. Those new Star Wars movies milked it, even more than those old Star Wars movies. Hope, since at least 9/11, has become a central come-on in the romance of the Millennial voter.

"Sure, everything sucks right now," we are told. "But we have HOPE." And we must, we're also told, hold onto hope at all costs, like a candle flickering in the wind. But in the face of impending doom, I say: forget hope. Hope is a promise designed to be left unfulfilled, the carrot at the end of a stick that stretches out past an everexpanding horizon. "I would not give a farthing for the mortal whom empty hopes can set afire," wrote the ancient Greek tragedian Sophocles. Put simply, and in more starkly contemporary terms: Hope is bad.

In his 2017 book, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, philosopher Slavoj Zizek draws a useful comparison between the pathology of hope and nicotine addiction. Anyone who has attempted to kick smoking (or any other similarly addictive habit) is likely familiar with a recurring process, in which one briefly gives it up and then, having given it up, feels entitled to keep on smoking, comforted by the knowledge that they possess the requisite willpower to quit at some later juncture. As Zizek writes, in such cases, "the possibility of change is evoked to guarantee that it will not be acted upon." And so, in order to truly quit smoking for good, the smoker must acknowledge the severity of their addiction. They must embrace not hope, but hopelessness.

To accept this deadlock, to make peace with the meaninglessness that abounds in our present predicament, is not to shrug off responsibility. Hopelessness is not the opposite of hope so much as a state that precedes it. It is not enough for the Rocky of Rocky III to sit and hope he can beat Clubber Lang. He must be utterly humiliated by his enemy, so that he may train and refine himself to come out swinging in the rematch. Where hope is a mere magical fetish that we can invoke in place of meaningful change, hopelessness is an actual pre-condition for the type of change our predicament demands.

Our current environmental crisis has no room for hope. There exists, in certain quarters, a watery optimism that billionaire tech tycoons can somehow save our planet, whether by accelerating the production of battery-powered automobiles, or building habitable starships to house humanity's remnants, or even more imaginative geoengineering projects that involve injecting aerosols into the stratosphere to shield us from solar radiation. The problems of our anthropocene epoch necessitate not quick-fixes, but a radical, urgent rethinking of the project of civilization. Millennials are almost reflexively opposed to prescriptiveness. And it makes sense. When all bastions of authority have been revealed as patently absurd, it becomes understandably impossible to have faith in much. But the problems of the future will reveal themselves most forcefully as moral problems, and ones which demand some uncomfortable moralizing.

In a recent interview, Jonah Campbell, of Montreal black metal band Spectral Wound, offered a disarmingly refreshing analysis of wading through the essential meaninglessness (or "nullity") of contemporary existence. "On the one hand, it is liberating," says Campbell (who, in the interest of full disclosure, I consider a longtime friend and



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foil), "but in a much truer sense, it is the very opposite. It commits one to the greater task of making the world, of an entanglement with an ever-convulsing, contorting world."

The meaninglessness that binds our world, through its increasingly erratic convulsions and contortions, need not be an occasion for nihilism. And the recognition of hopelessness doesn't necessarily mean that we resolve ourselves to an unsolvable impasse. Instead, such conditions can present opportunities. We must conceive of our effect on our planet as something other than a geologic calamity. As Anthropocene's filmmakers write, even the recognition of this human epoch "doesn't always have to mean the rapacious consumption, displacement and destruction of all other life on the planet. It can also mean awareness of our giant footprint and our responsibility to mitigate it."

We are entangled - to the planet and to one another. We are bound by a condition of meaninglessness that is acute and material, distinct from merely existential meaninglessness that wafted through the last century of eddies of stale Gauloises smoke. But just as the fact of the anthropocene can provide an occasion for meaningful change, accepting meaninglessness offers a chance to make new, potent, potentially earth-changing forms of meaning.

Maybe it starts with quitting smoking. Maybe it starts with a renewed intolerance for white nationalist, anti-immigrant rhetoric. Maybe it starts with a serious commitment to reversing the effects of human-created climate change - to the extent to which such a reversal is even possible. And maybe it starts with something as defiant and stupid as reclaiming a monstrous NHL mascot as an anti-Trump radical and unlikely icon of leftist resistance.

Because if the unlikely ascendancy of Gritty proves anything, it's that meaning is ours for the making. !@COPYRIGHT=© 2018 Postmedia Network Inc. All rights reserved.

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